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ABSTRACT

Circular reasoning is often employed in comparative advantage debate cases when only a plan and advantages are articulated without adequate reference to the resolution which inspired the proposal. The advancing of such subtopical analyses as debate cases is deleterious to the long-range interests of educational debate because the practice jeopardizes debate programs when witnessed by people outside the college debate fraternity, and the practice is often a waste of time because of fallacious reasoning, analysis, and argumentation. It is time to reexamine the concept of prima facie and to redefine burden of proof. It is recommended that a logical test be imposed by any critic to determine whether circular reasoning is present and that debate practices make sense to lay persons. (TS)

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THE AD CIRCULORUM FALLACY AND COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE DEBATING OR: WHY DON'T DEBATE CASES MAKE SENSE TO OUTSIDE LISTENERS?

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The Problem

The *Ad Circulorum* Fallacy is, simply, arguing in a circle. It is a form of tautological reasoning or reasoning which includes, as Glen Mills points out, "circular reasoning, question begging words and definitions, and nonevident premise."[1] The term *ad circulorum* was suggested by a fellow teacher of argumentation. A subsequent search of argumentation texts, rhetorical dictionaries, and assorted traditional speech texts failed to turn up references to *argumentum ad circulorum*. But arguing in a circle is consistently listed among such fallacies as *ad hominum, ad ignorantium, ad populum*, and, of course, *ad verecundium*.[2] Therefore, I must believe that the *ad circulorum fallacy* was indeed a member of that venerable list. In the final analysis, the term is semantically logical as a concept which for a long time was in search of a name.

While more elaborate descriptions of *ad circulorum*, or arguing in a circle, may be readily found in the literature, the definition provided by Rieke and Sillars is useful because it is clear and succinct.

> Circular reasoning is the process by which one argues that A is true because of B, and B is true because of A. Sometimes such circularity can go in long circles involving a whole series of connections, but essentially, no matter how many connections, the problem involved is that one ends up by using as proof the very claim with which he began.[3]

Richard Whately observed years ago that:

> The *narrower* the circle, the less likely it is to escape the detection, either of the reasoner himself (for men often deceive *themselves* in this way) or his hearers. When there is a long circuit of many intervening propositions before you come back to the original conclusion, it will often not be perceived that the arguments really do proceed in a 'circle'; just as when any one is advancing in a *straight line* (as we are accustomed to call it) alonga plane on this earth's surface...[4]

The *ad circulorum* fallacy is manifested in comparative advantage debate cases when only a plan and advantages are articulated without adequate reference to the resolution which inspired the proposal. Lacking is a set of goals or criteria which provide a yardstick which yield a measure of advantageousness in terms of the resolution. Rather, the desirability of achieving advantages provides rationale for adopting a plan. And the adoption of a plan leads to accrual of advantages. Thus, "A is true because of B, and B is true because of A."

But what, then, is wrong with arguing in a circle in the debate setting? Max Black noted that such a pattern of argument is not in itself invalid, rather, "the ground for condemning such arguments is their fruitlessness as proofs."[5] If the task of the affirmative advocate is to offer sufficient reasons to adopt a resolution, and his mode of proof rests on a circular case structure, then a judge is justified in finding him without a *prima facie* case. And a negative team would be most justified in pointing to the *ad circulorum* fallacy as indication of failure to uphold the affirmative burden of proof.

It is the position of this paper that while widely accepted debate practice is to advance unusual and unexpected analyses of a national proposition, that practice is deleterious to the long-range interests of educational debate. At least two reasons are advanced in defense of this thesis: 1) the practice jeopardizes debate programs when witnessed by people outside the college debate fraternity, and 2) the practice often involves students in expenditure of time and effort in behalf of falacious reasoning, analysis, and argumentation theory.

The first problem that arises is that not all cases which do not implement a whole resolution are sub-topical. Thus, a case on gathering and utilization of information about U.S. citizens would not have to deal with all such information at the same time and within a single one-hour debate. Those who voted for that broad resolution, most would agree, had in mind a tolerance for variety, perhaps in the realization that a topic year can be a long dull period, and perhaps because they recognized a necessity to challenge negative advocates with more than a proposal which could be completely inferred from the wording of the proposition. Thus, the dilemma arises, how much divergence from the resolution is allowable: How much specificity can be tolerated?

Let us illustrate how the *ad circulorum* fallacy is applied in every day comparative advantage case development. An affirmative begins by stating the resolution; then proceeds to offer an observation. The proposition might be, Resolved: That the Federal Government should provide a program of comprehensive medical care for all of its citizens. The affirmative might observe that there is an acute doctor shortage, then offer a plan which would double the number of medical students within a five year period. This would result in the advantage of having more doctors available to provide medical service. That, in essence, and with no small amount of evidence related to doctor shortage, would comprise the first affirmative speech. From that point on, the affirmative could alternate between plan and advantages, using the need for doctors to justify adopting the plan and the plan as providing good reason to believe the advantages would be forthcoming. But what happened to the resolution? Have we forgotten that the debate was over a proposition calling for comprehensive medical care for all citizens? And what of the visiting professor or passing lawyer who decides to visit a round of intercollegiate or high school debates? Will those witnesses hear a good clash when the negative did not expect the resolution to be interpreted to a call for medical education? For professionals trained in current debate practices and for highly sophisticated debaters, such questions sound naive and uninformed. Yet, a rexamination of basic comparative advantage theory may point up some serious problems in logic which lend credence to the layman's view.

First, let it be recognized that there are really two genre of debate cases in current use, regardless of the ever-growing list of supposed specialized forms. One typology rests its inherency claim in the status quo, and most theorists would recognize the basic type as the "needs" analysis, regardless of organization or title. The comparative advantage genre, in contrast, places its inherancy claim in terms of future probability. Regardless of whether the case cites goals of the status quo, desirable criteria, or makes no references to goals or criteria, a case which focuses upon future desirability rather than upon present inherent problems is of the comparative advantage genre and is, thus, susceptable to the *ad circulorum* fallacy.

Bernard Brock clarified obligations of comparative advantage cases in his 1967 article. Contrasting the advantage approach to the traditional needs case, he held that:

> As a result of its general acceptance of conditions as they are and its insistence upon improvements in the future, the obligations of the advantages affirmative differ significantly from the traditional obligations. The advantages affirmative accepts four obligations: first, it must accept the goals and basic assumptions of present policies; second, it must present a plan which is basically compatible with the present system; third, it must prove that these goals will be achieved to a significantly greater degree than under the present policies; fourth, it must be prepared to prove that conditions would improve more by adopting the affirmative plan than they would be implementing any action which is precluded by the affirmative proposal.[6]

While Brock agrees that the goals "obligation is often assumed rather than stated by the affirmative,"[7] Mills, writing in 1969, carries the theory a step further when he observes that:

> The general idea of this approach (comparative advantage) is the comparison of the status quo with the affirmative plan on the basis of results for the purpose of a greater probability of desirability on the side of the proposed change. The standard of desirability is, of course, the goal which the affirmative should announce early in the proceedings. That goal might be greater justice, efficiency, economy, or some other ideal.[8]

Thus, rather than mere *implication* of goals, Mills would opt for a clear *statement*, and early in the debate.

In 1975, George Ziegelmueller and Charles Dause talk of levels of goals in case construction:

> The comparative advantages case requires the determination of a secondary level of goals and the establishment of all its casual links on this secondary level...
>
> When differences do not exist at the primary goal level, then subordinate criteria must be applied in order to evaluate the two systems. These secondary goals (values, criteria) may be special qualitative factors such as speed, efficiency, fairness, or, may involve the application of such qualitative measures as more or less.
>
> To develop a case based on the comparative advantages approach, an advocate begins by selecting subgoals appropriate to the situation. The wording of his arguments should clearly reveal what those secondary goals are...[9]

Our mentors of argumentation, thus, would have our affirmative debaters clearly state some goals, or criteria, or values as a basic for finding advantage. Active debate coaches would probably have to agree that current practice often omits specific citation of goals or criteria. The further would agree that the national resolution, ostensibly the object of debate for the academic year, receives only passing mention.

The impact of this procedure has, in my opinion, potential for serious diminution of the traditional quality of American academic debate. The *ad circulorum* fallacy, when used in comparative advantage case construction, and when judges do not use its implementation as reason for giving the affirmative the loss, is the warrant for the widespread use of evasive and obscure cases. Many practicing directors of forensics have verbalized concern about the proliferation of surprise and unexpected cases which leave negative teams with little or nothing to say. Yet, what has been lacking is a theoretical reason for rejecting such analysis.

While some judges philosophically reject some cases, and vote against them simply because they are piqued or displeased, they are often hard-pressed to offer logical reasons for their decision.

The Changing Environment of Academic Debate

This is a period of financial constriction for most institutions of higher education. Moreover, secondary schools in many states face severe budgetary cutbacks resulting from a national malaise termed, collectively, taxpayer's revolt. As financial restrictions become more imperative, institutions simultaneously face constant pressures to expand and develop new and different programs designed to be "more relevent" in such areas as vocational education, minority studies, environmental studies, and remediation. Institutions must more frequently reassess priorities within a context of diminishing resources and growing demands.

The problem facing many speech educators in this context is the preservation of the highly traditional and rather specialized activity of academic debate. At least eight intercollegiate forensic programs have been eliminated from just the Pacific Northwest scene in the past five years and another ten can be cited which have faced severe budgetary cutbacks either at the hands of economy minded administrators or student associations. At the same time, secondary programs are in budgetary trouble whenever funds are short. In this context, the question must be raised, is academic debate suffering from a weakness of credibility which makes it susceptible to the financial axe?

Numerous articles, conferences, and now, book chapters, have been devoted to the emergent weaknesses (or excesses) of contemporary debate practices.

The influence of college programs over high school practices is well known. Steve Brower concluded in the May, 1975 issue of the *The Rostrum*, the organ of the National Forensic League, that:

> As long as college debaters judge debates and use the same criteria they do, high school debate may be doomed as a viable educational tool.[10]

And, in the November issue of that same publication, L.D. Hanks, widely respected high school coach from Glendale, California, laments that:

> Whereas formerly half of (his) debaters would continue into college debate for two to four years, now fewer than 10 percent last more than a semester. They say it is sterile, talking in an unrealistic manner to a judge concerned with superficial material unrelated to a real situation.[11]

Malcolm Sillars and Richard Rieke, in their new text, review the interchange between David W. Shepard and Kathy Cory[12] regarding interpretations of the 1972 national debate resolution:

> Consider, ... one topic debated in 1972: Resolved: That greater controls should be imposed on the gathering and utilization of information about U.S. citizens by governmental agencies. During that year, a variety of interpretations emerged, including cases on legalization of marijuana, federal aid to education, for law enforcement officers, abolition of grand juries, parolee rights, invalid eyewitness testimony, and many others. One writer suggested that common sense would not permit such a wide variety of interpretations on the same topic; the respondent replied that all had been challenged on "topicality" and "extratopicality" and had survived to win as often as they lost. Therefore, if the judges bought the case it must be all right. Such an issue over whether or not the affirmative is arguing "within the topic" is unique to competitive debate.[13]

The problem of defining just which analysis is appropriate under a given resolution has led to untold hours of discussion and debate within the forensic fraternity. I would offer my own definition of a squirrel case as one which I am not prepared to debate. Obviously, my students research all authentic and proper analyses of the national resolution, ergo: one which they have not researched is not topical. Moreover, many who judge debates claim to know a squirrel when they hear one. Others say they never know, and they rely on negative advocates to provide them with sufficient reason for voting against a given case on grounds of non-topicality. Added to the problem is the hierarchy which has developed in debatedom wherein students involved in well-financed and well-traveled programs discuss cases and share evidence and refutation patterns which place them in a position to cope with unusual cases. This leaves less affluent and less nationally oriented programs to fend for themselves. This works to the liking of those "national" programs as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. The national teams and judges "know" which cases are topical, which cases are in vogue and which arguments may be adduced against them.

No matter how important national achievement and aclaim may be to any institution, there is always the possibility that scholars and administrators from outside the fraternity may have occasion to witness one or more rounds of debate. Given that possibility, there is also the chance that at that very moment, some affirmative team may be arguing a proposal for, say increased seat-belt legislation, as an implementation of the resolution calling for a national policy of land-use.

One can imagine some difficulty that would result if a dean who had once participated in the college debate of the 1940's and, who, consequently, had become an outstanding political scientist in American Government were to ask, somewhat simply, "what the hell does seat-belt legislation have to do with land-use.?" I do not know how the typical director would respond, but I do have a feeling that more and more people in evaluative roles are going to become increasingly concerned with what is becoming a rather bad inside joke. And whether the criticism is specifically in terms of topicality of affirmative cases, the practice of composing unusual cases comes at the nexus of a whole pattern of gaming which has accelerated recently, and which includes 1) tacit recognition of a "circuit" of "national" tournaments, 2) tacit recognition of those programs which belong to the group qualified to debate in those tournaments, 3) tacit recognition of the practices of those programs to form the national body of accepted practice, and 4) an increased sense of "gaming" among those national programs, as characterized by emphasis on surprise, upon the sharing of confounding through shallow argumentative blocs, evidence, and case outlines.

The practice of advancing subtopical analyses as debate cases is one highly significant manifestation of the problem. It should be treated as a problem to be solved within the debate fraternity before it contributes to the loss of debate programs, big or small.

A Proposed Remedy

Recognition by debate teachers, coaches, and judges that many current affirmative case structures omit a sense of criteria or goals should lead to some reexamination of the nature of the concept of *prima facie* in terms of comparative advantage debate.

It would seem realistic to impose perhaps a new burden, or if not really new in concept, a redefinition of burden of proof. That burden could be called a burden of comprehensiveness which would insist that an affirmative sustain throughout a debate advocacy of the resolution, or some criteria or goals by which advantageousness could be measured in terms of the resolution, a proposal for government action, and a claim of how the proposal is comparatively advantageous in meeting the criteria or goals, and thus, implementing the resolution.

I would suggest further that a logical test could be imposed by any critic to gain a relatively clear impression of whether the burden of comprehensiveness was being carried by an affirmative case. The critic could ask, assuming he suspects that an *ad circulorum* fallacy exists, *could the plan be implemented without implementing the resolution, or, could the advantages be achieved without implementing the resolution?* If the answer is yes, the fallacy is probably present. The critic, in addition, can also impose a test upon the goals or criteria proposed.

A proposal to define as non-*prima facie* a case which does not consistently link itself to advancement of a total analysis stemming from a resolution could provide the rationale which has been lacking. If judges who felt that affirmative teams were not meeting their *prima facie* obligations would vote accordingly, it would not be long before affirmatives were advancing the resolution, goals or criteria, presenting a plan which implemented some significant part of the resolution, and showing advantages which derived not just from the plan, but from the resolution as well. We would then know the realization of advantages through sustained application of goals and criteria as instruments of measurement and comparison.

What is most important is that such an approach should make more sense to lay persons. If that is the case, then we can make more effort to involve non-forensic specialists in our program as judges, as resource persons, and as members of audiences. And we can do this in the pride of achievement which accompanies a job well-done in one of the great traditions of American education.

Footnoes

[1]Glen E. Mills, *Controversy*, 2nd ed., (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968), p. 270.

[2]For example, see: Richard A. Lanham, *A Handbook of Rhetorical Terms*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 50.

[3]Richard D. Rieke and Malcolm O. Sillars, *Argumentation and the Decision Making Process*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), p. 89.

[4]Richard Whately, *Logic*, 8th ed., p. 201.

[5]Max Black, *Critical Thinking: An Introduction to Logic and The Scientific Method*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 216.

[6]Bernard Brock, "The Comparative Advantage Case," *The Speech Teacher*, (XVI, March, 1967, No. 2), p. 120.

[7]*Ibid.*

[8]Mills, p. 237.

[9]George W. Ziegelmueller and Charles A. Dause, *Argumentation: Inquiry and Advocacy*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), p. 164-165.

[10]Steve Brower in, *The Rostrum* (Vol. 50, May 1975, No. 2)

[11]L.D. Hanks, "Debate, A Dying Educational Tool?", *The Rostrum*, (Vol. 50, November, 1975, No. 3), p. 3.

[12]David W. Shepherd, "Burden of What?" and Cathey Corey, "The Spirit of '72: A Reply to David Shepherd," *Journal of the American Forensic Association*. 9 (Winter, 1973), pp. 361, 365.

[13]Reek and Sillars, p. 285.

This article is adapted from a paper presented at the Western Speech Communication Association Convention, Seattle, November 23-26, 1975.